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ABSTRACT

In the face of escalating youth unemployment, some new approaches are needed for training out-of-school youth in Australia. The current system of apprenticeship has become outmoded because many of the skilled trades that the system prepares young people for will soon be non-existent. One approach to this problem has been implementation of short-term training courses; however, they are simply an example of the government's reactive measures designed as a response to immediate manpower needs or the present high level of unemployment. The challenge instead is to move from these ad hoc measures to an active manpower policy, to create training schemes that can increase the number of real, permanent jobs available by making possible the growth of new, self-supporting industries that would otherwise not get off the ground for lack of the necessary skilled manpower. Some of these possible strategies are the following: (1) alternatives to apprenticeship (especially in the manufacturing area), such as modular training for short periods or sandwiching courses between terms of full-time employment in the field; (2) avenues of transfer between sectors of tertiary education: (3) a first-job program for school leavers; (4) a youth guaranteed employment or training scheme; and (5) opportunities for lifelong education. Although it would be unrealistic to expect any of these measures to bring about an immediate reduction in unemployment, the value of such programs is that they represent an investment in future economic growth rather than a mere holding action to keep young people temporarily out of the primary labor market in the hope that things will somehow improve in the meantime. (KC)

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# Skills Training For School Leavers: Some Alternative Approaches

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# SKILLS TRAINING FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS: SOME ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

The growth of youth unemployment in recent years has focussed public attention on Australia's system of skills training. As technology gradually eliminates the low-skilled base-grade jobs in industry and the white-collar sector which once provided the great majority of openings for school leavers, it is becoming increasingly clear that future generations of school leavers will stand little chance of finding stable employment unless they enter the labour market with some kind of vocational or professional training. It is also becoming clear that the apprenticeship system, the most important source of skills training, has failed to keep pace with this need. In the decade from 1971-72 to 1980-81, while teenage unemployment grew by 350 per cent, the number of apprenticeship commencements increased by only 49 per cent, and the total number of apprentices in training by a mere 26 per cent.[1]

Other objections have been raised to the apprenticeship system besides its inability to accommodate the demand for skills training. The most important is that it is an effective method of passing on existing skills, but not very useful for teaching new ones. There is a growing belief that the current recession, if and when it eventually comes to an end, will be succeeded by a period of major structural adjustment in industry which could well prove equally traumatic in its consequences for employment and the training system. Many of the industries which have traditionally provided the bulk of apprentice places will decline in viability, with an associated decline in demand for the kinds of skill they are capable of teaching. At the same time, a new generation of profitable industries will demand new types of skill which existing industries have neither

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1. Unemployment figures for the 15-19 age-group for August in the respective years are:

   1971: 23,700 (3.7%)
   1981: 105,600 (13.9%)

   (Source: ABS, The Labour Force)
   Apprenticeship figures drawn from Dept. of Employment and Youth Affairs, Apprenticeship Statistics 1971-72 to 1980-81, Tables 1,4.

the resources nor the expertise to teach in the workplace. The result will almost inevitably be a further transfer of responsibility for training from employers to the formal education system.

So far, Australia has done relatively little to prepare for these new demands. Present Commonwealth policies on training fall into four broad categories:

(i) measures to encourage the growth of apprenticeship in its present form, e.g. CRAFT;

(ii) measures to make the apprenticeship system work more efficiently, e.g. Group Apprenticeship Scheme, Group One-year Training Scheme;

(iii) support for the provision of full-time training at a level below that of the traditional skilled worker, e.g. Skills in Demand Program, General Training Assistance (formerly NEAT);

(iv) schemes to provide generalist pre-employment training (including work experience) without reference to defined manpower needs, e.g. School to Work Transition Program, SYETP.

The common feature of all these approaches is that they are essentially reactive measures, i.e. they are designed as a short-term response to immediate manpower needs or to the present high level of youth unemployment. The challenge that faces governments today is to move from these ad hoc measures to an active manpower policy: a long-term broad strategy which will coordinate employment and training schemes, industry assistance and the education system into a flexible system with the ability to accommodate itself to fluctuations both in labour supply and in the demand for skills.

Better training will not solve the unemployment problem by itself. The best training system in the world will provide only illusory benefits if the work opportunities are not there. Nevertheless, manpower training schemes, if planned properly, can achieve something which no other kind of employment policy can: they

can increase the number of real, permanent jobs available. They can do this by making possible the growth of new, self-supporting industries which would otherwise not get off the ground for lack of the necessary skilled manpower. In contrast to other types of youth employment program, they can provide their participants with genuine self-esteem and a sense of purpose, and make constructive use of what would otherwise be prolonged periods of unemployment. It must be remembered, however, that they need to be complemented by measures in other areas of policy, including adequate income support for the unemployed, action to create additional jobs, permanent and temporary, in both the private and the public sectors, and incentives to those young people who have the ability to proceed to the more traditional kinds of post-secondary education.

This paper sets out a number of possible strategies for moving from the present training system and the present kinds of reactive youth employment scheme towards the basis of a future active manpower policy. It is not meant to exhaust the possibilities, but simply to demonstrate a sample of the alternative approaches that need to be considered.

## A. ALTERNATIVES TO APPRENTICESHIP

Although there has been considerable diversification in the levels of training offered in Australia over the last two decades, the skilled worker qualification gained through apprenticeship remains, along with the university degree, the most important point of reference for status and salaries in the Australian labour market. Yet it is often forgotten just how recently apprenticeship, as a method of training, has come to be associated exclusively with the skilled blue-collar worker. Before the growth of public tertiary education, it was virtually the universal means of training even for such traditionally high-status professions as doctors, architects and

lawyers. Even within the present century, some classes of professionals (e.g. surveyors and librarians) continued until quite recently to be trained under what was essentially an apprentice system. Its persistence in the blue-collar trades must be seen more as a survival than as a rational response to training needs, and even here its survival is now threatened by changes in the structure of industry.

Apprenticeship is a relatively lengthy and expensive method of training based on three main presuppositions:

(i) that a skilled worker need be trained only once, at the beginning of his career, and can subsequently remain an effective worker at this level for the rest of his working life, with only minimal retraining on the job;

(ii) that the skills involved are such as can be passed on, largely by example, from one generation to the next;

(iii) that the apprentice, in the course of his training, can carry out income-producing functions which compensate the employer to some extent for the costs involved in his training.

In certain fields, e.g. hairdressing and most of the building trades, these assumptions still hold good and will probably continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The main changes that are taking place now affect the role of skilled workers in manufacturing and the associated service industries. Earlier waves of technology generally displaced jobs at the unskilled and semi-skilled levels, but the current wave, based on the availability of cheap computer, robotic and microprocessor technology, will have its most significant impact on skilled jobs in industry. The impact will be felt in three ways:

(i) The process of manufacture will become less skill-intensive with increasing use of robots, numerically controlled machine tools and computer-aided design and manufacture;

(ii) The products will change from self regulating mechanical systems which depend on a precise match and interaction of their components for their efficient operation to less internally stable systems in which the control functions are carried out by machine-produced microchips;

(iii) The service requirements of these new products will make fewer demands on skilled labour, because the main source of wear and failure will lie in the solid-state microelectronic systems which are cheaper to replace than to repair.

The most significant consequence will be the deskilling of many of the traditional manufacturing trades. Beyond the introductory period (when skilled workers will still be needed to program the new machines), the human input in the production stages will consist mostly of machine-minding tasks which do not require the traditional hands-on skills of a tradesman. The pre-production stages, on the other hand, will require a greater component of intellectual labour, and hence will tend to become the responsibility of technicians rather than craftsmen. Maintenance and repair of the new products will place a greater premium on diagnostic than on manipulative skills, though even the former will tend to become routine once the technology is more widely adopted.

The most obvious consequences of these changes will fall on the existing skilled workforce. Many skilled workers may eventually be unable to find work, or be forced to spend the latter part of their working lives in lower-paid and lower-status positions. Even if they retain their jobs, their level of work satisfaction will decline considerably. But the more lasting and insidious effects are already being felt in the training system.

The apprenticeship statistics suggest strongly that employers are increasingly reluctant to bear the costs of new apprentices as it becomes clear that the long-term demand for traditional skilled workers will decline. It is a measure of their reluctance to carry these costs (even when subsidised by the Government) that the lack of

graduating apprentices has led to short-term bottlenecks in the supply of skilled labour that often disadvantage the very employers who are responsible for causing the shortage in the first place. Ostensibly as a short-term measure, many employers are looking to fill these key vacancies with young workers trained through short intensive courses - often funded wholly or in part by the Government through the Skills in Demand Program - which do not qualify them for fully skilled status under industrial awards.

The danger is that, as more jobs traditionally filled by tradesmen become deskilled, the burden of skills training will shift increasingly from formal apprenticeship to these intensive courses. The growth in some States of "skills centres" outside the formal education system is evidence of this trend. Young people will be discouraged from undertaking the long-term commitment of an apprenticeship, with all the costs it implies in forgone income, if the only jobs that await them at the end of their indentures are the same ones they could have qualified for after a year of full-time training. At the same time, the more able among them will find it increasingly attractive to undertake technician-level training, which they can already complete in some fields by full-time study in half the time it would take them to complete an apprenticeship. Full-time training at this level is not currently favoured by the majority of employers - principally because TAFE does not have the resources to offer training on the most up-to-date equipment - but eventually it may provide employers with a new opportunity to recruit skilled labour direct from the education system, without bearing any share of the training costs.

Technological change is also destroying the old implicit assumption that all trade qualifications represented a roughly equivalent level of skill. In some trades the requirement for manual skills has declined measurably over the last decade or so. In others, the complexity of the work has increased to the level that tradesmen trained under the traditional system have difficulty in coping with

it. Once it becomes clear that different apprenticeships do not lead to a uniform level of skill, the case for apprenticeship as a uniform method of training will become weaker.

There is nothing intrinsically objectionable in these developments, insofar as they represent a rational adjustment of the training system to changing demands for skill. In practice, however, there is a danger that they will lead to further fragmentation of the workforce and close off traditional avenues of mobility and advancement in industry. So long as the apprenticeship-based trade certificate remained the universal base qualification for skilled workers, it is probable that many tradesmen completed their indentures with a level of skill higher than they actually needed in most workplaces; but at the same time, they generally had the opportunity to progress to more responsible and demanding jobs, and often even into management positions, without any subsequent formal qualifications. Even where such qualifications were needed, they often built on the basic trade qualification. Ten or fifteen years ago, the normal means of qualifying as a technician was to complete a relatively short part-time course based on a trade certificate; today, these end-on courses represent only a tiny minority of the middle-level courses in TAFE.

The probable result is that both traditional trade qualifications and the new semi-skilled qualifications gained by full-time study will be effectively terminal. Four consequences seem likely to flow from this situation:

(i) Trade training will eventually be downgraded, both in status and in skills content;

(ii) A large pool of existing skills will go to waste;

(iii) The balance of numbers and power in the industrial workforce will shift from the traditional factory-floor workforce to technicians whose interests are generally more closely associated with middle management;

(iv) The increasing specialisation at each level of training will work to the disadvantage of small firms which cannot afford to carry sufficient employees to embrace the full range of qualifications.

This scenario is a somewhat pessimistic one, but its chances of coming true will be greater if the skills market is allowed to sort itself out on purely free-market principles. There is a clear role for government intervention to ensure, on the one hand, that the publicly-funded training system produces a skills profile more appropriate than its present output to the changing needs of industry; and on the other, that the rights of existing skilled workers are preserved and all employees in industry have the opportunity to develop and exercise their potential skills to the highest level of which they are capable. The two alternative policies that follow are directed explicitly at this need.

## 1. Modular Training

This approach implies a radical restructuring of the technical education system to replace existing types of long-cycle course, leading to more or less terminal qualifications, with a range of cumulative short courses of no more than 12 months' duration, leading to a graduated scale of qualifications recognised by the educational authorities and industrial awards. Under this system, it would be possible to move by small increments from the unskilled to the higher technician level; in some fields, there could be as many as four steps between the unskilled and the present trade level. The lower-level courses would be kept fairly diverse and generalist to allow the maximum subsequent flexibility, and it would be feasible to take some of them in secondary school, perhaps even beginning before the minimum leaving age. At the higher levels, a larger proportion of the courses would be offered part-time, or split up into segments which could be taken under paid work-release.

From the point of view of school leavers, this scheme would have the advantage that each step would represent a recognised and marketable qualification. This would increase its attractiveness to poorly-motivated school leavers who see little point in committing themselves to the types of short course currently available. On the other hand, since successful completion of each stage would confer an automatic entitlement to proceed to the next, those who elected to begin with a relatively short or elementary training would not be locking themselves into a low-status job for life. From the point of view of industry, this arrangement would mean that existing staff could be upgraded rapidly when a significant demand for higher-level skills arose, and special modules could be added to train already qualified workers in new types of skill as they came into demand.

The modular approach is already followed to some extent by TAFE in this country at the technician and post-technician levels. In the U.K., it has been fairly common practice in trade training for over a decade, albeit within the context of an apprenticeship system. What is not often realised is that an alternative modular training system has existed there for many years in the shape of the examinations offered by the City and Guilds of London Institute, through which it is possible to move in three stages from semi-skilled to higher technician status.

2. Sandwich Course Training:

This approach is somewhat less radical than the last in that it leaves open the possibility that some training will still need to take place through integrated long-cycle courses of several years' duration. The proposal is that these courses be split into blocks of one year or six months at a time, in between which the student would work full-time for the equivalent period in a permanent position, at the award rates appropriate to his level of skill. This arrangement would serve two purposes:

- It would cater for those areas of work in which on-the-job experience is a necessary part of training;
- It would provide students with a means of financing their own full-time studies.

In addition, it would allow greater flexibility for students to extend the time taken to complete their courses, whether for financial reasons or because they found difficulty in keeping pace with the work.

This pattern of training has recently gained in popularity at the degree and diploma levels, especially for engineers. The main problem has been difficulty in finding suitable work in between the segments of the course. This problem would be the major barrier to extending the system to lower levels of training. It would probably be necessary to negotiate some arrangement with employers whereby designated positions were filled on a job-sharing basis by two applicants taking turns to work and study. This could be offered as part of a package to replace apprenticeship requirements; in this guise, it could well prove attractive to employers, since it would relieve them of the responsibilities of indenture and most of the burden of training costs.

## B. AVENUES OF TRANSFER BETWEEN SECTORS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

One of the major barriers to flexibility at the middle levels of the labour market is the lack of opportunity for students to move between the three sectors of tertiary education - universities, Advanced Education and TAFE. It is one of the great paradoxes of Australian tertiary education that while the respective roles of the three sectors are defined only in the most abstract and general terms, the administrative boundaries between them are so rigid as virtually to preclude structural reform. Not only do entry requirements vary

from sector to sector, but it is very uncommon for an institution in one sector to give formal credit for studies completed or partially completed in another sector.

This means that students who choose initially to take a course at a level below their abilities have no alternative but to start again at the beginning (often with the additional preliminary burden of studying for an adult matriculation) if they subsequently decide to earn a higher-level qualification. Conversely, those students who find the course of their first choice to be beyond their capabilities receive no credit for their studies if they opt instead to study for a less ambitious qualification; where apprenticeships are concerned, they have usually left it too late anyway. The other problem with this rigid demarcation is that it makes it harder to provide training in new areas of skill where all three sectors might have something to contribute. Universities have traditionally been unwilling to offer short courses, except for non-credit adult education courses, while the CAEs, which were originally expected to cater for this type of training, have shifted virtually their entire emphasis over the years to the more prestigious degree and diploma courses. The Williams Report proposed a number of measures to overcome this problem, generally involving one sector providing teaching staff or courses for another;[2] but in most cases it would seem more straightforward to move the students concerned from one sector to another as appropriate.

In many other countries, the division between sectors is not nearly as rigid. In Eastern Europe, formal avenues exist for graduates of trade courses (which are taught there as full-time institutional courses) to proceed direct to technician-level training, and thence to a degree. Similar provisions exist in several Western countries, though they usually involve specially upgraded base courses or supplementary examinations to allow graduates of one stage to proceed to the next. The alternative approach of allowing more or

2. Report on Education, Training and Employment, Vol.I, Chapter 6.

less automatic transfer of credits between different types of post-secondary institutions has been common in the U.S. for many years.

In Australia, the opportunities are fairly limited for governments to introduce any of these approaches on a system-wide scale because of the greater autonomy enjoyed in particular by the higher-level institutions. The division of responsibility for education between the States represents another barrier to rationalisation on a national scale. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the institutions themselves are beginning to soften some of the demarcations as a result of pressure to keep up their student numbers. For example, many universities now informally recognise a good technician or (more rarely) trade qualification as fulfilling the educational requirements for mature-student entry, while a few CAEs give advanced standing to new students who have successfully completed designated TAFE courses. Further incentives along the same lines might be the best way to open new avenues of transfer. As a beginning, the Tertiary Education Commission might be encouraged to make special grants to enable particular institutions in different sectors to redesign specified courses in such a way that they interlock and allow for guaranteed progression from one level to the next.

## C. A FIRST-JOB PROGRAM FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS

While the basis of any long-term strategy must be to ensure that no school leaver enters the adult job market without some kind of recognised and marketable vocational qualification, the fact remains that a proportion of young people will continue to look for work immediately they leave school, whether because they are unable to make a decision on the type of training they require, or because they want or need an independent income. Furthermore, educational planners have recognised for some time that prospective students experience a marked

gain in motivation and maturity if they spend a period in the workforce before proceeding to post-secondary studies. Both these ends could be met by rationalising the present youth job schemes in such a way as to ensure that every school leaver who does not choose to proceed directly to further studies or training has the right to a guaranteed twelve months of employment.

A variety of measures could be used to provide a pool of suitable jobs, including targeted subsidies, tax concessions to participating employers, and direct job creation in the public sector. The scheme would differ from existing schemes such as SYETP in three significant respects.

(i) The scheme would provide guaranteed employment for a flat twelve months in all cases - no more, and no less. This would be clearly understood in advance by all parties, though a participating employer would not be prevented from taking on participants as permanent employees, at his own expense, at the end of the twelve months.

(ii) School leavers would be given employment under the scheme in the expectation that they would enter some kind of tertiary education or training program at the end of the twelve months, unless they had meanwhile found a permanent job. To facilitate this, TAFE and other training institutions could be encouraged to adopt a deferred-entry scheme similar to that offered by some universities.

(iii) The jobs made available under this scheme would all be genuine full-time jobs in the primary labour market, paid at the appropriate award rate. The aim of the scheme would be to provide not only work experience but sufficient earning capacity to give the participants a start in adult life.

## D. A YOUTH GUARANTEE SCHEME

The kind of provision outlined above is one facet of a more comprehensive type of youth employment policy which has come to be known as a youth guarantee scheme. The basic premise of this approach

is that the state has a responsibility to ensure that every young person, for a certain period after leaving school, is gainfully occupied either in paid employment or in some kind of post-secondary education or vocational training. A further provision that is commmon, though by no means universal, to such proposals is that unemployed young people within the age-group covered by the scheme should have the right not only to a place in training, but to some kind of income support while this training is taking place. Following the principle set down by the OECD, this training allowance should be higher than the unemployment benefit, but lower than the minimum full-time award wage.

There has been considerable discussion of such schemes in many countries, but none has so far been fully implemented. Proposals were developed to a fairly advanced stage in several Scandinavian countries, but the advent of budgetary difficulties and conservative governments over the last two years has prevented them from coming to fruition. Interestingly, however, it is a conservative government which is introducing the scheme that comes closest to the definition of a comprehensive youth guarantee. This is the program, known variously as the Youth Training Scheme and the New Training Initiative, which the U.K. Government will introduce in 1983 to replace the Youth Opportunities Program.[3]

## E. OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIFELONG EDUCATION

Structural change is gradually destroying the old assumption that a worker needed to be trained only once at the beginning of his working life. Retraining, refresher courses and updating of qualifications seem likely to become increasingly necessary for

3. Short descriptions of this program can be found in Times Higher Education Supplement, 7/5/82, p.15, and The Australian TAFE Teacher, May 1982, p.5.

workers at all levels, so that by the end of this century the average persons's working life will be punctuated by regular periods of full-time study. As a result, the emphasis of post-secondary education will need to shift from long-cycle courses for young people to recurrent or lifelong education.

It is not necessary to see this need purely in terms of vocational training opportunities. As the diminishing demand for labour creates more leisure, a part of this increased leisure could profitably be devoted to general education, particularly for those sections of the community that can normally expect to receive no further formal education, other than purely job-related skills training, after they leave school. For example, it might come to be seen as the right of all early leavers to undertake continuing general education later in life, if necessary with income support, at least up to a level corresponding to a completed secondary education. A further advantage of this approach is that with large numbers of workers taking time off work at any one time to undertake full-time study, overall labour force participation could be reduced in a way that would lead to fewer undesirable social effects than any of the present methods of achieving this goal (e.g. early retirement schemes, longer periods of compulsory schooling and measures to discourage married women from seeking work).

Two problems will need to be solved before this reform can be implemented. The first is at the level of the education system. Part-time and external university courses, which are the traditional means for working adults to undertake higher education, have suffered disproportionately from the contraction of funding for tertiary education in recent years. In any case, this mode of study is not really suitable for any but the most highly motivated and academically able of students. TAFE, which was expected by the Kangan Report to provide the bulk of increased opportunities for adult general education, has devoted most of its increased funding to vocational courses, and its general adult courses remain largely

confined to the traditional options of formal adult matriculation and hobby courses. Here too, the emphasis will need to move from evening courses to full-time day courses which can be taken in relatively short blocks under work release.

The other problem is to devise some form of income support or equalisation which will enable adults with family responsibilities to undertake periods of full-time education without financial hardship. The best means to achieve this would be a system of education credits under which an employee would accumulate the right to a number of weeks of paid educational leave for each year worked. This could be supported by a central fund similar to the present workers' compensation funds, with contributions drawn from employers, employees, and possibly government. The alternative is for arrangements for educational leave to be negotiated between unions and employers and written into industrial awards. This approach has been successful in Italy, where a number of major metal unions in the early seventies negotiated a formal entitlement to 150 hours a year of paid educational leave for every worker covered by the agreement.[4]

## F. CONCLUSION

Insofar as most of the measures suggested here involve a transfer of training costs from employers to the public education system, it is inevitable that they would make additional demands on public sector resources. However, their impact would probably not be as great as might appear at first sight. In the first place, a large proportion - probably a majority - of their beneficiaries would otherwise be drawing unemployment benefits: hence, the same expenditure paid as training allowances would produce a potential economic asset which would not have existed had it been paid

4. Hannan, W., "Working People and the Right to Know". Radical Education Dossier, Spring 1981.

purely as income support. In the second place, a considerable amount could be reallocated by phasing out existing schemes such as the Transition Program which have no foreseeable impact on the total number of available jobs.

It would be unrealistic to expect any of these measures to bring about an immediate reduction in the overall incidence of unemployment. There are other options - some of these significantly cheaper to implement - which would have a more visible impact on the statistics in the short term. The value of the kind of programs outlined here is that they represent an investment in future economic growth rather than a mere holding action to keep young people temporarily out of the primary labour market in the hope that things will somehow improve in the meanwhile. As such, they would mean a more efficient allocation of whatever resources governments see fit to expend on youth employment. Because their benefits would be felt beyond the end of the present recession, they would make a significant contribution to restoring full employment, not only in the short term, but throughout the working life of the generation now leaving school.